

Everything was fuzzy. But not in the warm, kind way. Fuzzy like...an angry Vornskr that wanted to maul you to pieces. Yes, that was how it felt, most certainly. She was sure of it.

The light she had been gifted flittered and flickered, a festing haze of darkness. She took her gift for granted sometimes, and realized that as it faded and fizzled, she would be left with nothing. Her world was collapsing around her. Her whole body felt like an inferno. She was sweating, she knew, but even an ice bath would not have made the sensation dissipate. Her nose was running, causing her to sniffle, and when she tried to force herself to sleep, she simply couldn't because she would wake herself up in a fit of coughing (caused by her runny nose, as it were. Rude thing).

Logically, in the depths of her mind, she diagnosed her symptoms. She went through her prognostics, factored variable plausibility against her knowledge of her own respiratory system. Years of study and knowledge of the humanoid body filtered through her mind as she tried to form links between ailments but to no avail. After days of this methodic self-diagnosis, she had come to a simple conclusion.

She had no karking idea what was wrong with her.

Atyiru Ceasura Entar had been whipped and beaten and battered and broken before. But this? This was worse. She was a medic, and it was her job to cure the sick and those who needed it.

Instead, she was stuck in her bed, rife with fever and with absolutely no idea what the issue could be. But hey at least, was that she wasn't *dying*. Yay! The only thing that anyone had been able to figure out was that whatever she had come down with was meant to keep her down and out of action, but without killing her.

And then of course, there was *him*.

From what she had been told in the few times she'd managed to sit up and listen cohesively, he had arrived the day she had been reduced to her bed. Arcia had assumed the throne and was handling the day to do business, while Timeros and K'tana lead up an internal investigation that involved one part investigation and two parts "coercing" information from potential suspects. Bleu, Uji, and Braecen were working angles of their own, and even Ood seemed to be at a loss. He had retreated to his lab and locked himself inside, refusing to come out until he had found a cure.

Through all of that, however, *he* had stayed with her. He was all *Deadheart* and serious around the others, but when he had the rare time alone with her, he brought her soup and tea. He brought her fresh flowers from the felurigade and fruit. He brought her a leaf that was lucky and tied it around her wrist with a lanyard that smelled faintly of lemons. He explained to her that the lanyard was string made of sturdy sediment that thought it belonged to be flying high in the sky.

He tried other things too, of course, that were more scientific and pertinent. All of that seemed small and faint compared to the warmth of the other gestures, though.

She managed to sit up. She looked around her room, but her unique Force-vision was blurry and spotted.

“Marry...?” she whispered groggily.

“No, just me sadly,” Kordath said as she rested a hand on his friend's shoulder.

“Blue boy...”

“Yes Blinky?”

“Marry?”

“He had to leave.”

“Oh, I see...”

She felt a bit of her energy drain at the thought. Of course he had left. How could she blame him? He had duties to attend, just as she did. His had grown far beyond what he had wore as Consul though. He had his own battles to fight now, new ones that were twice as dangerous.

“He said he would be back. He said that if anything happened to you, he'd personally string me up, have me skinned, and use my furr to light the torches used to set my pyre on fire as I'm paraded through the streets of Estle City. So, could you do me a favor and not die?”

She smiled at that, but only slightly. It was a sickly smile, small and tired, a ghost of her usually radiant beam.

--x--

The Consul sat up suddenly and shrieked. Kordath winced as he jogged over to her beside.

“What's wrong?”

“I can't stop itching,” she growled through a sickly weeze.

“Maybe you got fleas?”

“I can't get...oh for fraks sake--” her potential streak of swearing was cut off by a stream of hacking coughs. She spit into a jar on the side all phlegm, mucus and a bit of blood.

“That doesn’t look good, Blinky...”

“It’s ok...I became Hokage,” she continued weakly, slumping back into bed. Believe it!”

“What the hell is a..Hokage? Atyiru, you need to rest...”

“No. You see...I was a sandshrew. And now I’ve evolved into a Sandslash. I’m not afraid...you see. I need to tell him.

“Atyiru...”

“I need to tell him I am now a Sandslash.”

“...what the...what the karking hell is a Sandslash?”

“Shh shh shh... just get Marry. He will understand.”

“I can’t do that--”

“It’s ok. I need to tell him that I have figured it out.”

“Atriyu...he’s...not coming back,” Kordath finally said with an exasperated breath.

“What do you...mean?” she asked, as if she could not possibly comprehend the implication of his words.

“Marick was mad. He got a lead on a possible cure and took a trip to the Hapes Cluster and Milnar. We traced the beacon and found his ship. Apparently, he had somehow managed to set the autopilot and an astromech to jump him back to Dajorra. We found him...on the floor. He had a strange poultice gripped in his hand, and we found some kind of tonic he had been compounding in a pestle and mortar. It was the petals of some kind of flower. We had Ood run some tests, and he confirmed that they were indeed poisonous. Apparently, he was trying to filter the toxin with his own body to attempt to create an antidote...”

Kordath handed her a bundle. It was Marick’s robes, tied with twine and with a note attached. The note was in a raised font that Atyiru’s fingers were able to brush over and read. There was a simple set of words.

*I will always be by your side,* the note read.

They were nice words. But words were wind, though. Hope leaked away from what remaining resolve she had clung to. She hugged his robes and the note against her chest and cried

without tears as her grief overtook her. Without him, she had nothing. Blackness began to close in, slowly enveloping her. She didn't care anymore what happened.

Blackness...

--x--

"--step aside," a voice called out. It was firm and familiar and cold as glacial ice.

"You're not authorized--Auugggh!" the sound of bones snapping and a body thumping against the floor rang out from the other side of the doors.

The doors to her chambers opened, and in he came. His aura pierced through the darkness like a beam of pure light.

"Stand down, Bleu," the same voice called out. "The fennec fox frolics fearlessly forward."

"That stupid code phrase...oh, jesus...Marick. You're supposed to be dead," Kordath exclaimed.

"It was a near thing," the Combat Master replied, a hint of fatigue creeping into his voice. "How is she?"

"Not well...she..." his voice trailed off as he pointed at the heart-rate monitor. It was crashing slowly. "Wait, how the bloody hell are you--"

"I don't even have time to explain why I don't have time to explain," he said curtly. "Space Honey Badger. Timeros. Exposure to toxins. Now, move."

Marick pushed past the Ryn and moved to the side of Atyiru's bed.

"I have the cure," he said slowly as he took her hand and squeezed it tightly.

"Thought...you were...gone..."

"No. I told you, Atyiru: *I will always be by your side.*

He leaned in then and pressed his lips to hers. They molded together effortlessly, like they belonged entwined. Marick lowered his walls and opened his heart. He let the Force flow freely through his body, and then released that same energy into her through their kiss. With their minds melded and their hearts linked, Marick allowed himself to love and trust fully in another being. He had been hurt and scarred and betrayed but somewhere deep down he had always

carried it. He had had to face death itself to understand this, but he had been granted a second chance.

He wasn't about to waste it.

He pushed harder, straining his consciousness to the very point of breaking. When he pulled back from her lips, he looked to be ten years older. His cheeks had become even more hollow, eyes sunken. He had given the ultimate sacrifice, a piece of his own vitality.

But when the steady beep of her heart began to sing loud and true, he knew that it was all worth it. She took in a fresh gasp of breath.

"I will always be by your side," she said in a clear voice. Her vision was normal and straight and all the colors of her world were vibrant in her mind's eye. "Seven words."

Marick smiled weakly, and then his head slumped forward and lay to rest at her side. She cradled his head to her body and stroked his hair, and looked over at Kordath.

"Give us the room for now. Tell Arcia I will resume duties in the morning."

"...as you wish," Kordath said with a shrug, shaking his head at the ludicity of the past few weeks.

"Marick-badger..." he grumbled to himself as he closed the door.